

The Oracle Paths

Volume 5: The Last Tutorial

Chapter 518 - Red District

On the spur of the moment, Jake put his Shadow Guide to work, a tool he seldom used these days. Wishing to find Maeve dead or alive as soon as possible, he waited for the guide to show him the way, and ideally for it to turn around to spare him from entering this hellish area.

Unfortunately, he was quickly disappointed. His Shadow Guide stood resolutely still and Jake was more than familiar with this scenario. If Bhuzkoc, Maeve's supposed master, didn't have an Oracle Rank higher than his, then something here was interfering with his functioning. Remembering the Dungeon Digestor's imminent threat, he quickly stopped fretting about the matter.

'Xi, do you know what a Dungeon Digestor is?' Jake prompted his AI casually. Perhaps he should have started there.

[I once knew, but that memory eludes me now.] Xi apologized shyly. [I just remember that they don't always mean disaster. Many Evolvers see them as an opportunity for enrichment and training.]

'Then, let's hope that this Dungeon Digestor will be an opportunity for us.'

Before wasting any Aether to activate the Oracle Skill Promotion, Jake tested some simpler wishes and the lack of reaction from his Shadow Guide confirmed that there was indeed local interference.

For many Evolvers, being deprived of Guidance was like losing their sight or hearing, but for Jake it made it just a little trickier. Since he was usually more than a little wary of the Oracle System, he had long since begun to distance himself from it.

He then attempted a scan of the city, but failed.

[It is forbidden to scan the citizens of an Oracle Shelter or City,' Xi explained with some embarrassment. She had never revealed this rule to him because it was a given in her mind.

In fact, Jake knew it deep down. Everything was done in the Oracle Shelters and Cities to make sure that the residents inside were all equal. Violence, theft and other crimes were forbidden, as were mental spells that could influence the mind or the ability to judge. A scan, especially if performed by a High-Rank Evolver, could reveal a great deal of information about the person standing in front of it, and this broke the principle of fairness that was so dear to this place.

This did not stop him from believing, though, that these rules were meant to be broken. In an emergency or wartime situation, he refused to believe that scans would remain prohibited. What if Digestors were hiding in the Shelter and they couldn't use their scans to detect them?

[Only the owner or governor of the Oracle Shelter appointed by an Oracle Overseer can use the scan here.] Xi clarified his uncertainty.

[An Oracle Guardian oversees several dozen Shelters like this one, and they often place a manager among the willing and influential High-Rankers in the area. Given the Evolvers' average level here, a governor probably hasn't been officially chosen yet. This might explain the fierce competition between local tyrants like Bhuzkoc, Shaktilar and Melkree.]

'Does that mean I'm the only one allowed to use the scan on my Floating Island if I build an Oracle City on it?'" Jake made his Oracle AI confirm it with a twinkle of smugness in his eye.

[That's right.]

'Well, at least one good thing...' Jake thought darkly as he frowned. 'I guess I don't have much choice now, I'll have to go in.'

[Good luck. I'm with you no matter what.]

'Thanks, Xi.'

Jake then took a deep breath and held it. It wasn't to give himself courage, but rather to avoid exposing himself to those unbearable smells. Just the stench at the entrance to this Red District made him feel like he could get syphilis or AIDS if he breathed that air a little too long. To the smells of urine, excrements and other body fluids, the one of sémèn and cheap perfumes had joined this already explosive olfactory còcktail. If he didn't have so much confidence in his Constitution and Vitality, he would never have dared to set foot here.

It was only the beginning of the afternoon, but the opaque clouds outside the Black Cube made this district even more unpleasant and nasty than it really was. Everything was sticky and dirty like a garbage dump or rather a sewage plant.

On Earth or even in the collective imagination, a Red District could be shabby and even filthy, but it was usually a festive place where men and women of little virtue met to enjoy themselves. There were often bars, casinos and other services dedicated to entertainment and relaxation, and it was a great place to forget your worries as long as you weren't in debt, on drugs or one of the local pròstitutès.

This place was completely different. As the Red District of the Outer Shelter, this arrangement of makeshift brothels was simply a

continuation of the slums. By connecting tents or worn canvas and sometimes even some noble fabrics like silk or satin, these pròstitùtès, coerced or not, had more or less built themselves a ‘workplace.’

Tvulu ourol frt nfsaiamrl, euruzfiw hmimpzdpi, lophc mpo iacu f lmzu ovppg ar ovu qattiu md fii oval daiov frt ovu lmprt arlpifoamr jfl mgsampliwr rmr-ukalouro. Czaul md n:èàlpzè mz nfar, ezprol frt jvaqnuzl, fl juii fl ovu lifnnare md diulv fefarlo diulv juzu nuzduhoiw fptagiu usur om f rmzqfi vppfr.

In some cases, the fabric of the tents or pavilions was too thin or torn and it was even possible to guess, or even glimpse, the horrors that were going on inside. Some pròstitùtès who didn’t even have tents were copulating with their clients on the dung-covered streets, and some of the aliens even seemed to enjoy it.

Despite his best efforts, Jake had a hard time suppressing his disgust, but he strived to stay focused on his goal. Every time he came across a humanoid pròstitùtè, he would pause for a few seconds to study her face and compare it to the photo Kyle had given them.

There was no intimacy between these pròstitùtès and their clients and Jake could see long lines of men, women and other unidentifiable aliens waiting outside each of these tents. Sometimes there was a guard like Grosh screening the entrances and collecting the money, but hardly anyone got rejected.

At first Jake thought his investigation would be quick, but the area turned out to be much more crowded than he expected for an early afternoon. Although the Shelter was only home to a hundred thousand people, he had already counted over 10,000 pròstitùtès. In other words, in this tiny neighborhood, one tenth of the population was going through hell just for a crust of bread.

Squelching his emotions, Jake stopped roaming around like a tourist and spread his Spirit Body at full range despite the risks involved. His consciousness touched that of a few other Evolvers, but most of the residents here were just normal Civilians and they didn't notice anything special.

Those with decent Extrasensory Perception protected their minds, while the stronger ones retaliated without mercy to show their dominance. Faced with these people, Jake simply retracted his mental energy and sought to avoid them as best he could.

In a matter of minutes, he finished checking the identity of all the prostitutes and locals whose faces he could see. Several times, he had crossed young and thin brunettes who matched the profile he was looking for, but when he asked them to turn around, he had been disappointed, or rather relieved, each time.

That was the most terrible thing about this investigation. Running into Maeve here would immediately put an end to their mission, but it would undoubtedly be one of the worst eventualities. He would much rather continue to search, even if it meant learning that it was all a misunderstanding and that she was in fact happy and healthy.

With a rueful sigh, Jake turned to the colorful tents and pavilions he had not yet explored. He had already sifted through them with his mental sense, and had identified some potential targets.

Lphcaiw, ovulu gzmovuil juzu f bmaro uddmzo md lusuzfi lnuhaul frt ovu vppqrl juzu mriw f duj vprtzut. Nusuzovuiull, ovuzu juzu loaii lusuzfi tmxur nfsaiamrl om uknimzu frt ovu iarul ar dzmro md ovuq juzu fjdpaiw imre. Id vu zufiiw jfaout val opzr iacu ovu movuzl, vu jmpit rmo gu fgiu om daralv val qallamr dmz f imre oaqu.

Another solution was to wait for these prostitutes to be replaced, but he had neither the patience nor the desire to stay in this stinking neighborhood any longer than necessary.

Violence was unfortunately not an option and an ugly expression soon marred his face. He would have to spend his Aether again... How many bribes would he have to give to get rid of all those horny guys waiting outside those tents?

‘Hey handsome! Yes you ! How about a quickie?’

Jake who was still hesitating to get in line was surprised when he was hailed by a sultry and feminine voice. The next second, he felt two slender arms wrap around his in a tender embrace as they tried to pull him toward one of the tents that had just become available.

He felt like resisting, but remembered that it was actually his intention to check the inside of those tents. Alas, it was not Maeve. The woman who had just approached him had red hair and was in her late thirties. She must have been cute, but that was a distant memory after spending several weeks here.

Nevertheless, he let himself be dragged inside her tent. Because of the watchful guards and the ‘busy’ condition of the sex workers outside, he had not been free to ask the questions he wanted.

This woman seemed to have been here for some time.. Maybe she had the answers he was looking for.